



■ **Two quite disparate** groups of people have something profoundly interesting to say about work: the Reformers and country-music singers. Who can forget Dolly Parton's song "9 to 5," now thirty years old? All she can do, in the lyrics of the song, is dream about a better life; for now she just laments the day-in-day-out work. It's 9 to 5 today, 9 to 5 tomorrow, and weeks ahead of 9-to-5 days. And for all that, Parton laments that she's only "barely getting by."

More contemporary audiences can sing along to Alan Jackson's "Good Time." You can hear the drudgery in his voice when he painfully ekes out, "Work, work, all week long." The only bright spot for him is the weekend. Free of work, free of the boss, free of the time clock, he can have a "Good Time." He longs for it so much, he even spells out the words G-O-O-D and T-I-M-E in the song.

Work songs have been around as long as there has been work, at least in American contexts. Slaves sang about the hardships of work in the spirituals. At the turn of the twentieth century, railroad work crews or cotton-picking sharecroppers passed the time by singing "work hollers," sounding off to each other as a means of surviving brutal conditions. And the beat goes on to this day. Not only in country music, but in nearly all other styles of American music, work gives cause for lament.

▣ Vocation

The workweek is to be endured, with temporary reprieves coming on the weekends, the precious few weeks of vacation, and the fleeting years of retirement. If you listen to most music, you'll find that work gets a bad rap. And the music is a mere symptom of the culture, especially American culture. In any given survey, high statistics reveal that few among us find fulfillment, let alone dignity, in work. In contrast, try an Internet search for the word *vacation*. Last time I did, I had hits in the millions.

But next to country singers, another group has something to say about the subject of work. This group of people is the Reformers, and they have a lot to say about work. In fact, they prefer a different word for it: *vocation*. This word means "calling," instantly filling the notion of work with purpose, meaning, fulfillment, dignity, and even happiness. In the hands of the Reformers work is transformed, or re-formed, back to a place and a position in which God intended it to be.

Given the cultural climate concerning work, we would be well served by some historical, theological, and biblical reflections on work. Add up the hours, the weeks, the months, and the years; work fills the lion's share of our lives. Certainly God has not left us in the dark when it comes to work. In the pages of this booklet, we'll explore what Scripture teaches concerning work. We'll also look at how the Reformers shaped those teachings into the doctrine of vocation. Finally, we'll see what this doctrine of vocation means for us in the twenty-first century.

For many, Dolly Parton's line that we're "just a step on the boss-man's ladder" rings all too true when it comes to work. How sad, when a line from the psalmist declares a rather different notion: "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands!" (Ps. 90:17).

That's the vision of work we all want. And to get it, we need to understand this word *vocation*. So we'll begin with the question: What is vocation? Try an Internet search for the word. Last time I did, I found more hits than I thought I would—but far, far fewer hits than for *vacation*. We plan and think (and dream) about our vacations, but we should also apply at least a little energy to thinking about vocation.

DEFINING VOCATION

Latin lesson time. The English word *vocation* comes from the Latin word *vocatio* or, in the verb form, *vocare*. Its root means “calling.” It appears that William Tyndale, in his English translation of the Bible, first used the word in English. All Tyndale did was to bring the Latin word directly over into the English language. This Latin word that Tyndale transliterated into English had a technical and specific meaning. For a time, leading up to Luther, people had applied this Latin word nearly exclusively to church work. Priests, nuns, monks—they each had a calling. Everyone else in medieval culture, from merchants to peasants, from nobles to knights, simply worked.

Previously, however, in the Middle Ages, this hadn't always been the case. Especially in the early days of monasticism and in several monastic orders, work was viewed with dignity. *Ora et Labora* was their motto. Translated, this phrase means “Pray and work” (Latin lesson 2). Monks also knew how to reward themselves after their work. They invented, among other things, the pretzel, which came from a Latin word meaning “gift,” and more specifically “small gift.” Pretzels were the little rewards that monks enjoyed and passed on to children after the completion of a hard task, once the duties were done. They placed value on work and they placed value on play and leisure. Many of these